



~~Secret~~

CIADI - - - - INSITREP 95-006

# International Narcotics Review

June-July 1995

APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: MAR 2002

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

July 1995

Unauthorized Disclosure  
Subject to Criminal Sanctions

100

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

**International Narcotics  
Review**

June-July 1995

5

Peru-Colombia: Disrupting the Airbridge

**Highlights**

**Latin America**

**Africa**

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

July 1995

~~Secret~~

Asia

*This Review is prepared by the **DCI Crime and Narcotics Center**, with contributions from other offices. It assesses narcotics-related developments worldwide. The report leads with a short Perspective on a drug-related issue or trend that we believe is of special importance. The Perspective, which does not represent a coordinated Directorate of Intelligence assessment, is intended to be speculative and to generate discussion. The Perspective is followed by feature articles, and the remainder of the report examines various dimensions of the drug problem by region. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to the authors.*

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

## Peru-Colombia: Disrupting the Airbridge ☐

Increased interdiction efforts in both Colombia and Peru since March 1995 appear to have disrupted the flow of cocaine along the airbridge, for years the main conduit of coca derivatives moving from Peru to Colombia. Intensified law enforcement pressure—including the arrests of major Colombian and Peruvian narcotics traffickers—is forcing cocaine smugglers to alter methods of operation, including routes and modes of transportation. These changes have led to significant fluctuations in the price and supplies of coca, at least in some areas. There also are indications that some trafficking groups in Peru are in disarray and may be stepping up attempts to bribe counternarcotics personnel to ignore illicit shipments. ☐

### Importance of the Airbridge

Drug traffickers have long preferred air routes to move semirefined cocaine base to Colombia for final processing. The airbridge has provided them security from interdiction by ground-based police units and also from possible harassment or theft of narcotics by bandits and guerrillas. Air transportation also has allowed traffickers to make a speedier return on their investment, reduced possible spoilage of semirefined narcotics because of hot and humid conditions prevalent in drug areas, and permitted the use of staging areas with poor road access—thus decreasing the chance of drug operations being disrupted by authorities. ☐

Principally for these reasons, the airbridge is the most important chokepoint available to Peruvian and Colombian security forces trying to stem the flow of narcotics between the two countries. Lima and Bogota have sought to exploit this key trafficker vulnerability since 1992. Early efforts—focused mainly on attempting to deny traffickers the use of airfields by deploying security forces to municipal airports

and by blocking runways of rudimentary airstrips—succeeded in disrupting many drug flights from traditional growing areas in the Upper Huallaga Valley, but traffickers soon dispersed their activities to other areas of Peru, particularly in the Aguaytia, Apurimac, and Pachitea river valleys. In 1993 and 1994, Peru pursued an aggressive aerial interdiction effort to force down trafficker aircraft that was set back when the United States suspended intelligence and radar tracking support—which have been critical to the effective use of Andean air assets—in May 1994, allowing traffickers to resume direct flights without concern for their safety. Changes in US law and the Andean governments' willingness to ensure full compliance with international norms regarding shootdowns allowed US intelligence support to resume last December; however, the Peru-Ecuador border war earlier this year effectively delayed implementation until March. ☐

### Renewed Targeting of the Airbridge

The resumption of US intelligence support has allowed recent Colombian and Peruvian interdiction operations to disrupt the airbridge more effectively. US detection and monitoring airplanes and ground-based radar have helped both countries seize, destroy on the ground, or force down numerous illegal drug trafficking planes. ☐ Lima alone has seized or destroyed nine drug smuggling planes since April 1995. These successes have bolstered the confidence of interdiction aircrews and increased their sense of "ownership" of domestic antidrug programs. ☐

Peru has been the most assertive in denying its national airspace to trafficker flights. ☐

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~



Peruvian forces adhere to internationally recognized rules of engagement<sup>1</sup> for potentially lethal actions against aircraft; these include the declaration of restricted flight zones, radio and visual warning signals, and the firing of warning shots. In late June, a Peruvian Air Force aircraft based at Tarapoto intercepted a single-engine Cessna north of Yurimaguas that was heading toward Colombia. The Air Force plane tracked the Cessna for nearly two hours, during which it ignored radio and visual warnings as well as warning shots. The [redacted] commander authorized the interceptor to fire on the Cessna, which disintegrated and crashed in the jungle some 56 kilometers south of the Colombian border. [redacted]

Colombia also has been aggressive in targeting drug planes. On numerous occasions this year, Colombian [redacted] gunships have used US-provided tracking data to follow suspected narcotics-carrying aircraft. On at least five occasions, Air Force planes later strafed suspected drug planes while on the ground [redacted]

[redacted] After several of these incidents, Air Force helicopters reportedly airlifted security teams to the airfields to seize any aircraft that remained at the site. [redacted]

[redacted] In late June, for example, a suspected narcotics-carrying aircraft was detected in southern Colombia. After being informed of its landing site, Colombian interdiction forces arrived at the airstrip

<sup>1</sup> These procedures are identified by a 1947 international convention on civil aviation (Chicago Convention) and by subsequent international law. [redacted]

by helicopter the following day. After troops drew fire from traffickers, the Colombian Air Force used ground-attack aircraft to strafe portions of the airfield. [redacted]

### Impact on Traffickers

Improved air interdiction efforts have forced traffickers to reduce their use of the airbridge. [redacted]

Many traffickers appear to be stockpiling drug supplies until pressures ease. [redacted]

[redacted] The overabundance of coca derivatives probably is the cause for waning prices in many areas; [redacted]

[redacted] some traffickers have lowered their price of coca base by as much as 50 percent. [redacted]

[redacted] Such prices probably approach the break-even point and may force some producers to lay off workers or suspend production soon if prices remain depressed. [redacted]

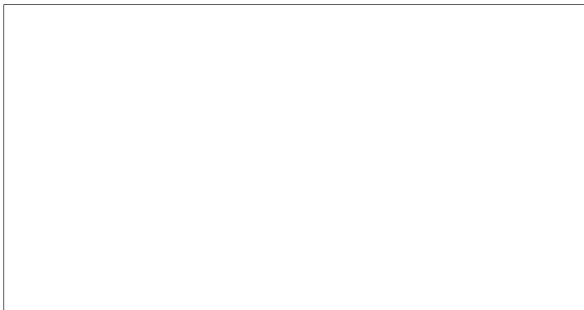
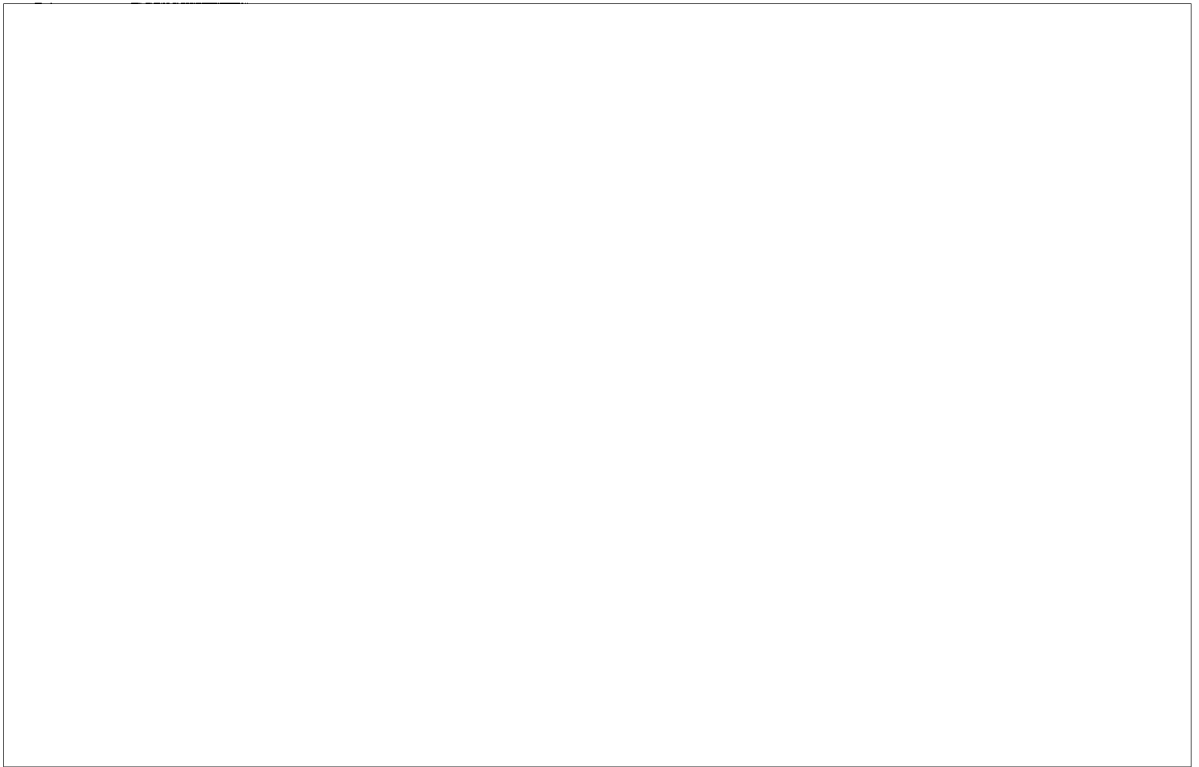
### Trying To Find Ways Around the Problem

Airbridge interdiction efforts are compelling traffickers to change their methods of operation. [redacted]

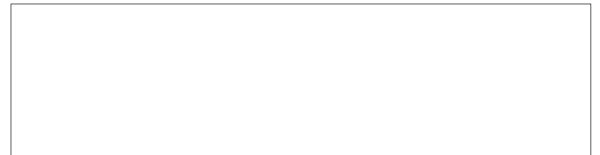
(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

~~Secret~~



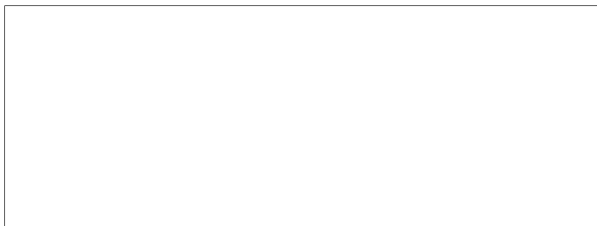
Some traffickers are trying to retain access to the air-bridge by suborning Peruvian Air Force personnel.



(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~

~~Secret~~



At least some traffickers may be poised to avoid the airbridge entirely by using riverine or land routes to transport coca [redacted]. Traffickers undoubtedly will make greater use of Peru's rivers to try to minimize disruptions to their operations. [redacted]

[redacted] Most major narcotics producing areas have easy access to the navigable headwaters of the Amazon River; these tributaries flow northward—toward Colombia—and are suitable for carrying even large loads of narcotics. Some of these same rivers are already being used by traffickers to bring in precursor and essential chemicals to jungle laboratories. [redacted] and to move at least some narcotics to staging airfields. Traffickers have avoided riverine transfers because they are slow, but they are likely to see the rivers as an increasingly attractive alternative if aerial interdiction pressures are sustained. [redacted]

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

## Outlook and Implications

Already off to a good start, aerial interdiction efforts have the potential to cause more serious, systemic problems for traffickers over the long haul. If pressures are continued, traffickers are likely to become more desperate in their attempts to circumvent interdiction forces. Many, for instance, are likely to step up efforts to buy off key military personnel by offering enormous sums for their cooperation. Should these attempts fail, some traffickers could be expected to try to coerce security personnel through violence and intimidation. Eventually, trafficker threats to US detection and monitoring personnel—while at present minimal—could increase as traffickers conclude that the gains from relieving the pressure outweigh the risk that such violence might intensify international antidrug resolve. [redacted]

A serious attempt by Peru and Colombia to improve their riverine and road interdiction efforts—simultaneous with the airbridge program—would have a more pronounced impact in curbing trafficking. At present, Peru's fluvial highways provide a usable, if inconvenient, backdoor to efforts to control the airways. Without them and the few extant roads in the drug areas, traffickers would have to rely on far less efficient means of transport, including human and animal pack trains. Such clumsy transportation practices would further reduce profits and put traffickers' valuable drug cargoes at greater risk of theft or loss. [redacted]

Over time, intensified and sustained aerial interdiction, complemented by operations to disrupt other avenues of moving coca derivatives to processing laboratories in Colombia, could erode the profitability of many traffickers' operations, substantially reducing their incentive to continue producing and trafficking in cocaine. Those traffickers that remain in the drug business probably would become fiercely

~~Secret~~



~~Secret~~

competitive—possibly spurring confrontations between groups, which would further stress the illicit trade. The troubles faced by the Cali mafia—a result of the recent arrests and surrenders of key leaders and security personnel—combined with an effective airbridge program could accelerate a trend toward processing finished cocaine in Peru by other Colombian groups and by Peruvian drug traffickers. Some Peruvian groups already have sold finished cocaine directly to traffickers from other countries—especially Mexico—who appear increasingly reluctant to pay high middleman prices for Colombian-produced narcotics. Cocaine carried overland and exported through Peruvian ports would, as it is now, be invulnerable to aerial interdiction efforts.

*This article is ~~Secret~~*

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

~~Secret~~